COVID-19 and its Effect on Domestic Violence

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Abstract

Background: Since 2020, there has been a pandemic that has impacted many countries around the world and it is known as the COVID-19 pandemic. For years, this pandemic has altered the ways in which people socialize, interact with each other in person, as well as altering employment, work hours, and the amount of time spent at home with others. This pandemic has led to the creation of policies such as lockdowns and stay-at-home orders. These policies have affected the economic stability and employment of many individuals as well as isolated them with others which affects them mentally.

Objective: This study aims to identify whether or not there has been an increase in the prevalence and severity of domestic violence crimes during the pandemic and what specific factors were involved.

Design and Method: The research method involves a case study which took place in the Integrated Domestic Violence Court in Westchester County, New York. Two samples of case files were selected at random. One sample was made up of cases that took place prior to the pandemic and the other sample was made up of cases that took place between 2020-2021. The research also involved scholarly journal articles from a psychology database.

Results: This study is significant because of how many countries around the world are being affected by this issue. Revisions to public policy and reformation regarding the access to support resources would be needed to help remove the opportunities that perpetrators are given after the implementation of these new restrictions.

Conclusion: At this time, lawmakers need to increase their understanding of the different ways in which a lockdown and stay-at-home policy can affect a person's life as well as a person who may be cohabitating with that individual. Lawmakers should work to revise the previous policies

to create one that can keep the public safe and work with domestic violence victims and prevention services to ensure the safety of the victims. There should also be more research conducted on the mental state of offenders to identify early signs and work on methods of intervention.

Keywords: Offender, pandemic, domestic violence, charge(s), lockdown, stay-at-home order.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background and Overview

Since the year 2020, the world has been overcoming a pandemic known as the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 is a virus spread by air as well as physical contact. The virus has an incubation period of 5-6 days. Hospitalizations for severe cases of infection lasted between 7 and 15 days (Sansonetti, 2020). Severe symptoms of the virus are loss of taste, difficulty breathing, chest pains, etc. The first outbreak began in 2019 and eventually became a global pandemic in 2020. When this pandemic spread to many other countries, it led to the creation and implementation of new policies, such as mask wearing, social distancing, stay-at-home orders, and lockdowns. These policies kept people at home more often with each other which may affect the risk of violence (Jarnecke et al., 2020).

Aside from isolating individuals, the new measures, such as stay-at-home orders and lockdowns, have created other issues for people that have affected them mentally. One of those issues was concern for financial stability and employment (Ceroni et al., 2021). This was mainly caused by changes in the work hours of individuals as a result of lockdown and stay-at-home policies, or a business having to close after being deemed a non-essential business by the new restrictions. The restrictions not only affected both essential and non-essential businesses, but also how domestic violence support services are allowed to operate. These changes could have an impact on a victim's access which could also affect the prevalence of violence in the home. Because of how much this issue is affecting people on a global scale, the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and the prevalence and severity of domestic violence needs to be explored and better understood.

Research Questions

This study will explore the following questions:

RQ#1: *Has the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in the prevalence of domestic violence?*

RQ#2: *Has the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in the severity of domestic violence crimes being committed?*

RQ#3: *What specific factors of the COVID-19 pandemic are responsible for an increase in the prevalence and/or severity of domestic violence?*

Definition of Key Terms

Offender: *A person who commits an act that violates a law*

Pandemic: *The outbreak of a disease over a country or the globe.*

Domestic violence: *Violent behavior that takes place within the home, often towards an intimate partner.*

Lockdown/Stay at home order: *A measure that restricts movement, as well as access to some places outside of the home.*

Charge(s): *An offense that a defendant is facing and can be convicted with. It can also be dropped or reduced.*

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been numerous studies conducted from 2020 to 2021 that focus primarily on the nature and function of domestic violence patterns that have been identified during this state of emergency. These studies have outlined statistics, factors, as well as input from practitioners regarding changes in service due to the pandemic and how that, in turn, affects the people who require their services. Most of the studies conducted highlight government policies such as lockdowns and stay-at-home orders as a major factor of the changes in domestic violence patterns. The studies go on to show changes in patterns in multiple countries including the United States, as well as a new form of domestic violence that stems from the nature of the pandemic.

A study was conducted in northern Greece which not only focused on the experiences of the women involved in the study, but it also provided the reader with other information regarding changes in domestic violence patterns in other countries around the world; "Calls to IPV helplines rose by 20% in Spain, 30% in Cyprus, and 40–50% in Brazil. A UK website about IPV received extensive traffic, with a 150% surge." (Chatzifotiou et al., 2021, p. 1) Another study that was conducted recently in 2022 analyzed the collection of domestic violence reports from multiple countries, including the United States. These statistics detail the prevalence of "intimate partner aggression" when the pandemic started for each country;

> …50% of women in rural Bangladesh who had experienced pre-COVID-19 IPA victimization reported increases in IPA victimization after the onset of the pandemic. self-reported physical IPA victimization increased fourfold in the U.S. during the early stages of the pandemic in April 2020. A 23% increase in IPA victimization was observed among women in Spain who were surveyed between May and June 2020. (Parrott et al., 2022. p. 1)

Another study that was conducted in New Orleans states that there was a 37% increase in aggravated domestic assaults in 2020. The studies go on to list and explain the factors associated with these changes in prevalence, primarily centered around new government policies that were created in response to the pandemic.

Most of the studies have listed stay-at-home orders and lockdowns as the primary reason for the increase in prevalence of domestic violence since the start of the pandemic. Some of the effects that the lockdowns and stay-at-home orders have had on the public were, alterations in home routines, increased time with intimate partners, as well as decreased time with people known outside of the home. One study says that during the time of lockdowns, abusers may use the situation to increase their level of information about their victim. The study provides a few examples, such as, "where their victims are, controlling victims' access to others, and manipulating victims without physical violence, simply by preventing access to phones and computers." (Chatzifotiou et al., 2021, p. 1) One study mentioned an increase in domestic violence prevalence in nine metropolitan cities in America since the enactment of lockdowns and stay-at-home orders. However, multiple studies also account for factors that can lead to a decrease in statistics without any change in the prevalence of domestic violence. The primary reason that they list is the cohabitation of the victim with the abuser during these public health measures. The studies state that the abuser in the relationship can prevent the victim from gaining access to support resources, such as emergency services, internet support resources, as well as social support from friends or family. One study mentioned housing instability as another factor from lockdowns that may lead to more violent situations in the home. One study reported on UNICEF's concern about an increase in young children being exposed to instances of domestic violence since the enactment of lockdowns, which would have negative consequences

on their neural development. For example, the study states that, “Experiences involving harm or threat of harm alter social and emotional processing to facilitate the detection of and response to environmental threats. Heightened reactivity can impair children’s emotion regulation and promote a hostile attribution bias.” (Cuartas, 2020, p. 1) The study goes on to explain how deregulation of emotion can lead to an increased risk of psychopathy in children. This also happens in conjunction with internalizing other disorders, which happens often in young children. Some of the disorders that were listed were depression and anxiety. Another study focused on how the pandemic has affected people with disabilities and how they may be more at risk for experiencing domestic violence. The study identified a different risk factor which is the dependence of the victim on the abuser for their everyday care. The enactment of lockdowns places more time with the abuser which would provide them with more opportunities to perpetrate acts of domestic violence. However, this is not the only issue for the victims in these particular situations. The study goes on to explain how the victims can feel as though they do not have a choice but to accept the perpetration of abuse because they are afraid of being deprived of access to the care that they need on a constant basis.

The enactment of lockdowns and stay-at-home orders has also contributed to the economic crisis which was another major factor that led to an increase in the prevalence of domestic violence. There were other factors involved that have been identified by other studies. Some of those factors were intimidation by the victim’s abuser, closure of some public services, for example, schools, daycares, and other services for children, and changes in the provision of domestic violence services, such as changes in care routines in domestic violence shelters. For example, one study states that during the pandemic, domestic violence shelters have only allowed essential staff members to work in person, while nonessential employees and workers

involved in nonresidential programs had to switch to working remotely. After the changes, the staff members themselves had concerns regarding their employment and they were uncertain about the shelter being able to stay open while operating in those conditions. Another factor was the development of pandemic related stress. Under the new measures, there was an increase in job loss and many people were very stressed as a result of the uncertainty of their financial security. One study reported on an experiment based on stress and alcohol consumption during the pandemic and found an association between pandemic related stress and increased perpetration of domestic violence. All of the factors mentioned contributed to increased levels of stress which then had an effect on the perpetration of domestic violence. One study outlined multiple types of factors that can have an effect on the perpetration of domestic violence. The researchers involved presented their findings using a Social-Ecological model that outlines the factors that were found and on what relationship level they are found. The study states that risk factors such as mental health problems, alcohol consumption, as well as increased stress levels fall within the individual level. Losing access to social support as well as isolation, and strategies used by an abuser to control an intimate partner would fall within the relational level; A decrease in access to resources centered around advocacy towards the issue would fall within the community level; Other factors such as stress brought on by changes in finances and/or changes in financial stability fall within the societal level.

In conjunction with the issues previously stated, there seems to have been a new form of domestic violence that was born from the nature of the pandemic. It is a form of psychological abuse that can be perpetrated in multiple different methods that have been identified by some of the studies that were previously mentioned. One study says that a form of this is an abuser utilizing the threat of exposure to COVID to prevent the partner from seeking psychological care

or medical treatment if it is needed. Another form that has been identified by another study is placing blame on an intimate partner for contracting the virus or being exposed to it, which, in turn, has a negative effect on the partner's fear of contracting the virus. Some other patterns are depriving the intimate partner from accessing personal hygiene items, and controlling the information that can be viewed by the intimate partner with regards to the pandemic, which further escalates the victim's fear towards the issue. Another form that has been found to have been used on people with disabilities and it works a bit similarly to blackmail. An example highlighted by a study is a caregiver or employee threatening a patient to send them to a more horrendous location if they decide to speak out about their situation. This method is not only utilized to keep the abuser protected, but it is also utilized in an attempt to keep the victim trapped in their situation. Another pattern that was identified by another study was an abuser faking COVID symptoms as a way to decrease the victim's time spent with friends or family as it would convince the victim not to leave their home. This pattern was also seen being used as a way to prevent the victim from contacting emergency services.

Multiple studies have also provided input as to how both the general public and policymakers should act based on what the researchers have observed and detailed in their studies. The study involving the Social Economic model of risk factors suggested, providing more access to mental health care that is more affordable, developing screening methods that will be able to detect abuse at an earlier time, providing domestic violence services with the status of an essential business during a time of emergency, as well as providing more people with job opportunities and more monetary support when needed. Another study suggested that both researchers and practitioners should participate in collaborative research to be able to properly identify every issue that has formed from the pandemic, and then act on what they found by

educating policymakers to create new policies that both accomplish their original goals, while mitigating the issues that were previously described. Other studies have suggested alterations to lockdown and stay-at-home order policies that would allow a victim to still have the opportunity to utilize multiple variations of support resources during a state of emergency. Other studies have suggested providing more government funding to support resources, such as shelters, as well as increased training for emergency service workers on detection and early prevention of domestic violence.

In conclusion, multiple studies that were conducted from 2020-2021 have shown various increases in the perpetration of domestic violence in multiple countries around the world, since the beginning of the pandemic. The studies have cited increases in Spain, the United States, the UK, Cyprus, Brazil, etc. The most common factors that were responsible for the increase that have been identified are, lockdowns, stay-at-home policies, pandemic related stress which was primarily caused by job loss and financial uncertainty, lack of access to various support resources, dependence on the abuser if the victim has a medical condition or disability, economic crises as a result of the pandemic, closure of public services for children, as well as alterations to the provision of support resources during the pandemic. In addition to the restrictions from new policies, there have also been new patterns of domestic violence based on the nature of the pandemic. Some of the patterns that were mentioned in the studies are, controlling the victim's access to information, controlling their access to personal hygiene products, making the victim feel afraid of contracting the virus to the point of refusing to seek help or visit family and friends, etc. The studies have also provided input as to what they themselves can do, as well as what the general public and lawmakers can do. Some of the suggestions were collaborative research between researchers and practitioners, alterations to lockdowns and stay-at-home policies, more

training for emergency service workers, etc. In connection with the literature, a case study was also conducted which provided more insight into how much domestic violence patterns have changed during the pandemic and what specific changes are taking place.

Chapter 3: Methods

The research design I employed in the study was a case study involving criminal cases. There were two different samples that were selected at random. I selected ten criminal cases that took place prior to the pandemic and ten criminal cases that are taking place during the pandemic. These samples provide me with the offenses that the person is being charged with, as well as what was happening during the commission of the crime, any prior convictions of the offender, as well as any reductions of previous charges. I chose this design because it would provide me with the highest amount of information and more evidence to answer the research questions. Employing this research design represents an innovation in the field because it not only provides basic statistical data, but what specific changes are occurring. The design I chose represents the most appropriate approach for this project because it shows me changes in patterns as they happen and it provides me with more insight into the mentality and actions of the offenders involved and how the samples from both times differ from each other. The analytical strategy that was used was the content analysis strategy. I deconstructed the information in each case file and categorized the information based on the type of crime that was committed and I recorded similarities and differences in each sample.

I selected three questions for the research being conducted, which were:

RQ#1: *Has the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in the prevalence of domestic violence?*

RQ#2: *Has the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in the severity of domestic violence crimes being committed?*

RQ#3: *What specific factors of the COVID-19 pandemic are responsible for an increase in the prevalence and/or severity of domestic violence?*

I chose this topic to research because domestic violence is a serious issue that may be impacted by the handling of the pandemic which is not being covered in mainstream news and other media outlets. The studies being conducted are new and I hope to contribute in any way to current investigations into how the pandemic has affected patterns of domestic violence. It is important for both policymakers, the general public, and researchers to know what is changing as a result of the pandemic and how it affects the public, so that improvements can be made to previous policies if there ever comes a time when similar policies need to be enacted again.

The research process was impacted by time constraints which prevented me from collecting a larger sample size as well as expanding my research to include conversations with police personnel. Engaging in those conversations would have allowed me to collect firsthand accounts of what they had witnessed on the job and any patterns that they may have noticed. I was also unable to engage in conversations with offenders which would have provided me with more psychological insight as to what factors of the pandemic led them to act in the ways that they did. The inability to engage in conversations limited my research to the information in the case files as well as the information in the academic studies.

I intend to use the research conducted to evaluate the patterns of domestic abuse that took place during the pandemic and make a comparison between patterns of domestic violence before the pandemic and the differences in patterns during the pandemic. In the following chapter, I will convey the findings of my study.

Chapter 4: Results

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a lasting effect on multiple countries around the world. Not only has this pandemic altered the ways in which people live their everyday lives, but it has also altered the ways in which people interact with each other due to the factors of the pandemic that have altered their lives. Aside from changes to everyday life, the handling of the pandemic has provided abusers in relationships as well as domestic violence offenders with more opportunities to carry out acts of domestic violence. Changes in the offender's mental state during the pandemic may also play a role in taking advantage of the opportunities and carrying out an act of domestic violence. This section aims to convey the findings of the research conducted by addressing the research questions with supporting information acquired from academic sources surrounding this topic.

RQ#1: ***Has the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in the prevalence of domestic violence?***

Multiple studies conducted have found that there has, in fact, been an increase in the prevalence of domestic violence since the start of the pandemic in 2020. There has been an increase in domestic violence calls in Spain by 20% since the beginning of the pandemic, and there has also been an increase in Brazil by up to 50%, an increase in Cyprus by 30%, as well as an increase in the use of internet support resources in the UK by 150% (Chatzifotiou et al., 2021). In 2020, 50% of women surveyed who experienced domestic violence before the pandemic in Bangladesh, reported an increase in prevalence after the pandemic began (Parrott et al., 2022). In 2020, there was a 37% increase in domestic assaults (Buttell et al., 2020).

RQ#2: ***What specific factors of the COVID-19 pandemic are responsible for an increase in the prevalence and/or severity of domestic violence?***

Several of the studies have concluded that the enactment of lockdowns and stay-at-home orders are a major factor for the increase in prevalence. For example, one study mentioned service calls for domestic violence reaching as high as 62% in some areas after the first month of the enactment of lockdowns (Kofman et al., 2020). Multiple studies explained how the lockdowns can lead to increased opportunities to perpetrate domestic violence. For example, one study described how lockdowns can isolate individuals from people they know outside of the home as a result of the order itself or an abuser who may now have an opportunity to control or restrict the partner's use of a phone or computer (Chatzifotiou et al., 2021). The study does explore the counterargument of this research topic which is that there is no change or a decrease in the prevalence of domestic violence during the pandemic. While some statistical information may mirror this claim, the study explains why this may be the case and it is related to the enactment of lockdowns. As stated before, the enactment of lockdowns has allowed abusers to control the use of their partner's phone or computer. Due to this change in circumstances, it may be nearly impossible for the partner to access support resources via phone or internet (Chatzifotiou et al., 2021). While the lockdowns are in effect, there would be instances of domestic violence perpetration and it would go unreported. An interesting finding is that people with disabilities are more at risk of becoming victims of domestic violence after the enactment of lockdowns due to their dependence on the abuser for critical forms of care that may be required on a daily basis (Lund, 2020). Another interesting finding is that abusers have used the nature of and the handling of the pandemic to create a new form of psychological abuse that would involve keeping the victim in a constant state of fear regarding exposure to the virus, depriving a victim

of personal hygiene products, as well as limiting information regarding the pandemic (Chatzifotiou et al., 2021). Another major factor was job loss and economic insecurity. (Ceroni et al., 2021). Another factor was changes in the provision of support services during the pandemic which negatively affected the victims' access and also left the employees concerned about their employment (Bagwell-Gray et al., 2020).

RQ#3: ***Has the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in the severity of domestic violence crimes being committed?***

To answer this question, there are two tables containing information about domestic violence offenders and their crimes. The following information is from two samples of cases taken from the Integrated Domestic Violence Court in the 9th judicial district of Westchester, New York. In these tables, there are details regarding the gender of the offender, the charges that the offender was convicted with, any prior charges of the offender, whether or not the charges involved physical harm, and if there are any similarities or relationships between the prior charges and the current charges. The first table contains case information from before the beginning of the pandemic. The second table contains case information from 2020 to 2021.

Table 1: Pre-pandemic Case File Findings

Offender's Gender	Current Charges	Do the Charges Involve Physical Contact?	Prior Charges	Are the Prior Charges Related to Current Charges?
Male	Assault 2, Grand Larceny 4, Menacing 2, Criminal Possession of a Weapon 4.	Yes	Driving while impaired, drug possession, weapon possession.	Yes
Male	Petite Larceny, Criminal Contempt 2.	No	Larceny, injuring emergency service workers, burglary, armed robbery, substance possession.	No
Male	Aggravated DWI, Aggravated unlicensed operation of a vehicle.	No	DWI, Criminal Impersonation 2.	No
Male	Assault 3, Criminal Contempt 1	Yes	None	No
Male	Forcible Touching, Criminal Trespass 2, Harassment 2.	Yes	Burglary 3, Forcible touching	Yes
Female	Criminal Contempt 2	No	Criminal Mischief 3	No
Male	Criminal Mischief 3, Harassment 2	Yes	Criminal Possession of a controlled substance	No
Male	Harassment 2	Yes	Criminal Mischief 3, Harassment 2, Bail Jumping 3	Yes
Male	Assault 2, Tampering with Evidence, Criminal Obstruction of breathing, Criminal Possession of a Weapon, Drug Possession	Yes	Drug Possession	Yes
Female	Stalking 4	No	None	No

Table 2: Case File Findings - Pandemic Years (2020-2021)

Offender's Gender	Current Charges	Do the Charges Involve Physical Contact?	Prior Charges	Are the Prior Charges Related to Current Charges?
Male	Criminal Obstruction of Breathing, Harassment 2	Yes	None	No
Male	Menacing 2, Endangering the Welfare of a Child, Harassment 2	Yes	Attempted Murder 2, Criminal Possession of a Weapon 2, Reckless Endangerment 1	Yes
Male	Assault 3, Criminal Mischief 4, Endangering the Welfare of a Child, Harassment 2	Yes	Assault 3, Criminal Mischief 3	Yes
Male	Assault 3, Harassment 2	Yes	None	No
Male	Stalking 4	No	Criminal Contempt 2, Assault 3, DWI	Yes
Female	Assault 3	Yes	None	No
Female	Assault 3, Criminal Possession of a Weapon 4, Criminal Mischief 4, Menacing 3	Yes	None	No
Male	Assault 3, Criminal Obstruction of Breathing, Harassment 2	Yes	None	No
Male	Criminal Obstruction of Breathing, Endangering the Welfare of a Child, Harassment 2	Yes	None	No
Male	Assault 3, Harassment 2	Yes	DWI	No

Based on the information in these tables, there were more cases that took place prior to the pandemic that did not involve physical harm to a victim compared to the sample from the pandemic. In the sample from the pandemic, only one offender's case did not involve physical harm to the victim. In table 1, most of the offenders had charges such as criminal contempt, which is typically a nonviolent crime, such as a violation of a court order. However, almost every offender from table 2 has a charge of assault 3 or a more serious charge. One interesting finding is the relationship of the prior charges to the current charges in both tables. Notice how most of the offenders involved with more serious and violent charges had prior charges that were similar or the same to the charges that they currently have. However, in table 2, quite a few of the offenders have committed heinous crimes such as endangering the welfare of a child, assault, and criminal obstruction of breathing without having any prior charges or any prior charges that they did have were not similar in any way to the charges that they currently have. Based on the information from both tables, there has been an increase in the severity of domestic violence crimes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This research aimed to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the prevalence and severity of domestic violence. Since the beginning of the pandemic, there has been an increase in the prevalence of domestic violence across the world. The case study portion of the research has shown that there has been an increase in the severity of domestic violence crimes being committed as well. Not only has there been an increase in both prevalence and severity, but the data has shown that there is also a new psychological form of domestic violence that has been created due to the nature and handling of this pandemic.

So, What?

The facts of the research have stated that the spikes in domestic violence in multiple countries have stemmed from the enactment of lockdowns and stay-at-home orders. Not only has this policy led to victims being isolated with their perpetrators, but it also led to other factors affecting the perpetrators' likelihood of carrying out an act of violence. A major factor, for example, was job loss and financial insecurity as a result of lockdown policies. It is important to examine the effect that policies have on the general public and what to account for when creating a policy such as this. It is imperative that lawmakers familiarize themselves with research such as this and gain a better understanding of the extent by which their policies can affect a person's life, which could then, hopefully lead to the development of a more refined policy that can keep people safe both inside and outside of the home.

Now, What?

While the research does answer the initial question regarding the severity of domestic violence, it is not a large sample size and the information from the case study samples does not answer the question as to why there is an increase in the severity of domestic violence crimes.

More research is needed to examine the mental state of the offenders to possibly identify other factors as to why there is an increase in the severity of domestic violence crimes. Conducting further research on the mental state of the offenders may also help to identify what specific factors of the pandemic led to them carrying out an act of domestic violence and/or what made them decide to commit a more severe act of violence. More research needs to be conducted on how a victim's access to support resources was affected during the pandemic and how alterations in service during the pandemic has affected a victim's access. Conducting more research and finding the answers to these questions can inform lawmakers of what to address in their policies, should they need to enact a similar national emergency policy, like the ones we have seen during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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